

WEDNESDAY MORNING: ASHES TO ASHES



[image: Ian D. Keating via Flickr]

It's your second morning-after this week, this one launching the countdown on Christian calendars to Easter. I'm a lapsed Catholic, but we do observe Lent in my household. My agnostic son resists, but I've explained this is an opportunity to be mindful about others' experience of going without. We are privileged to choose to give up, and we consciously recognize it by Lenten observation. Some choices we make, like giving up meat and sugar, are beneficial for us, but it's still the luxury of choice when others are forced to simply suffer without recourse.

This year we will be mindful of water. We take it for granted every time we turn on the faucet. Yet our brethren go without in nearby Flint, in spite of water's essential nature to life. I'll donate the money I would have spent on 46 days of meat-based meals to Flint's United Way Water Fund and the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, as both organizations are helping distribute water and filters to Flint residents. Last night's Boil Water order issued because of a water main break only underlines the difficulties Flint's

residents will face until the entire water system is replaced.

Dept of Duh: Director of National Intelligence says Internet of Things can be used to spy
NO! Say it isn't so! Like it never occurred to us that any device attached to the internet, including the growing number of WiFi-enabled household appliances, might be used to spy on us.

Volkswagen recalls cars – and not because of emissions

VW didn't need more trouble; this time, it's not the German car makers' fault. 680,000 VW-branded vehicles are being recalled because of Takata-made airbags which may be defective. TAKE NOTE: Mercedes-Benz models were also recalled yesterday.

Toyota, Honda, Acura, BMW, Nissan, Subaru, GM, Ford, Chrysler, and Daimler also issued recalls over the last two years for the very same reason – defective Takata-made airbags. See this article for a running timeline of events related to the recalls as well as a list of affected vehicles (to date).

Attacking the grid? Try a squirrel first – hacking is much harder

A honeypot mimicking an energy management system demonstrated the challenge to hackers trying to crash a power grid. Dewan Chowdhury, MalCrawler's founder, spoke at Kaspersky Lab security Analyst Summit about the knowledge set needed to attack energy systems:

“It's extremely difficult. You' can't just be a NSA or FSB hacker; you need an electrical engineer on board to weaponize attacks and figure out what's going on ... When it comes to weaponization, you need a power substation engineering who knows what needs to be done and tested.”

After reading about Chowdhury's presentation, I have two caveats. The first is the notion that

an “electrical engineer” or a “power substation engineer” is required. Many non-degreed workers like electricians and technicians are familiar with computers, networks, and SCADA equipment. The second is this bit:

The groups had access to the HMI, which would allow them to manipulate the grid, but Chinese, U.S., and Russian groups, he said, stick to a gentlemen’s agreement and leave the grid alone. Middle Eastern actors, however, will try to perform control actions to sabotage the grid.

A “gentlemen’s agreement”? When do the gloves come off? When one of these actors align with a Middle Eastern actor?

Global disaster – how would you respond?

In case a mess of squirrels are deployed to take down the world’s power grids, one might need to know how to deal with the inevitable meltdown of services. Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies modeled a global disaster in 2013 by way of a simulation game. The results were predictable:

What they discovered was that the country was ill prepared to cope. Within two weeks there would be enormous civilian casualties, a catastrophic breakdown in essential institutions, and mass civil unrest. Food supplies, electricity and transport infrastructures would all collapse.

International security scholar Dr. Nafeez Ahmed was asked how people should respond; he offered a nifty guide, outlined in six points.

But disaster isn’t always global, and current cases show our gross inability to respond to limited disasters. Flint, for example, already struggles with running water, item number three on Dr. Ahmed’s list. Conveniently, Flint doesn’t necessarily rely on government or law

enforcement (item number four) because neither responded appropriately to the ongoing water crisis. What remains to be seen is whether Flint will muster long-term self-sufficiency (item number six) as government and law enforcement continue to let them down.

Speaking of Flint, I wonder how today's Democratic Steering and Policy Committee hearing on Flint's water crisis will go, as Michigan's Governor Rick Snyder declined to appear.

"Don't necessarily trust the government or law enforcement" in global disaster, indeed.